CHANGES *in the* LAND

Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England

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For Nan

The implications of this second ecological contradiction stretched well beyond the colonial period. Although we often tend to associate ecological changes primarily with the cities and factories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it should by now be clear that changes with similar roots took place just as profoundly in the farms and countrysides of the colonial period. The transition to capitalism alienated the products of the land as much as the products of human labor, and so transformed natural communities as profoundly as it did human ones. By integrating New England ecosystems into an ultimately global capitalist economy, colonists and Indians together began a dynamic and unstable process of ecological change which had in no way ended by 1800. We live with their legacy today. When the geographer Carl Sauer wrote in the twentieth century that Americans had "not yet learned the difference between yield and loot," he was describing one of the most longstanding tendencies of their way of life. Ecological abundance and economic prodigality went hand in hand: the people of plenty were a people of waste.[9]

AFTERWORD

The Book That Almost Wasn't

Looking back to its first publication in 1983, I still feel a considerable sense of wonder that this little book exists at all, to say nothing of my gratitude for the generous ways readers have responded to it over the years. In truth, it could easily have languished inside a filing cabinet without ever seeing the light of day. The story of how it finally found its way into print thus has more than its share of serendipity, and may be of interest for what it reveals about the quirky accidents that lead historians to study and write about the things they do.

In one sense, *Changes in the Land* got started during my first year of graduate school at Yale, when I wrote the seminar paper that eventually became this book. But in another sense, it began much earlier, in the years I spent growing up in Madison, Wisconsin. My father was a professor of American history at the University of Wisconsin, and although his approach to the past was not mainly environmental—he specialized in U.S. national politics during the first half of the twentieth century—he taught me from a very early age to move through the world with the most basic of history's questions always in mind: *"How did things get to be this way?"*

The beauty of this seemingly simple query is that its answer is almost never as obvious as it seems. We typically take the world of our day-to-day lives far too much for granted, assuming without much thought and despite all evidence to the contrary that what we see before us is just the way things are—and presumably always were. This is, I think, especially true of many young people, which is a chief reason why high school history classes often

seem so dry and dull. The events of History (so grand, so formal, so remote) just don't feel relevant to lives that haven't yet straddled many years.

Being my father's son helped inoculate me against this kind of bored alienation from the past. He showed me that when we probe beneath the familiar surfaces of the present, peeling away one by one the layers of our own memories and the accumulated strata of the historical record, we almost always discover changes so profound that we scarcely recognize what we are seeing. As the saying goes, the past is a foreign country. People lived differently back then, thought differently, and conceived of their place in the universe in ways so different from our own that it can take an immense imaginative effort to understand them on their own terms. And yet, just as strikingly, it was they, those people in the past, who laid the foundations for the lives we now lead and the world we now inhabit. Asking how so alien a Then could have become so familiar a Now is a never-failing source of wonder that can transform the way we think, not just about the world, but about ourselves as well. This is history's gift to those who have learned to seek out the hidden patterns in the scattered jigsaw puzzle pieces it has bequeathed us.

The dynamism and strangeness of the past are by no means limited just to people. Other creatures have histories too, as does the earth itself and all the rest of nonhuman nature. When we ask how things got to be the way they are, these nonhuman stories can be just as compelling as any of the more familiar tales that relate to human beings, whether those tales tell of presidents or farmers, masters or slaves, women or men, capitalists or workers. Rats and dandelions and smallpox viruses turn out to be pretty interesting and consequential too.

The importance of nonhuman subjects is among the chief insights that environmental histories such as *Changes in the Land* have offered to a scholarly discipline that might otherwise focus almost entirely on humans and their concerns. When early works in this new field first began to appear in the 1970s and 1980s—not just *Changes in the Land*, but Donald Worster's *Dust Bowl*, Richard White's *Land Use, Environment, and Social Change*, Stephen Pyne's *Fire in America*, Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature*, and others—the initial reaction from scholarly and lay readers alike was that these books represented something entirely new, a bold departure from traditional history. And compared with innumerable historical writings that pay no attention whatsoever to the natural world, the contributions of environmental history can only be celebrated. I'm sure I share with my colleagues in this field the hope that someday no historian will write as if people and their societies can be understood purely on their own terms, with no reference to natural systems and no acknowledgment of the other creatures with whom we share this planet.

But it would be misleading in the extreme to claim that this insight originated two or three decades ago with the emergence of environmental history as a new scholarly discipline. The effort to interweave humanity's past with that of the rest of nature in fact has much older and deeper roots. This is where my Wisconsin childhood in the 1960s and 1970s turned out to be essential preparation for writing about ecological change in New England landscapes three hundred years earlier and a thousand miles away. For reasons I still do not entirely understand, the University of Wisconsin has been home for more than a century to scholars in a wide array of disciplines—ecologists, geologists, sociologists, economists, lawyers, geographers, historians, and others—who have all taken humanity's relationship with the earth as a primary intellectual pursuit and passion. Although I certainly did not fully appreciate this as a child, I grew up in a community where "changes in the land" were topics of daily conversation. This book thus began not in New Haven, but in Madison: what I found in the New England landscape was what I had learned to look for in the Middle West.

What do I mean by this? It is difficult to grow up in Wisconsin without eventually becoming aware that the landscape bears innumerable marks of past transformations whose signs are everywhere if only one learns to recognize them. For one thing, most of the state lay buried under glacial ice less than fifteen thousand years ago. Wherever one looks, one can see evidence of the glacier's passage in geological features whose very names suggest the exotic fascination of a vanished past: erratics and eskers, kames and kettles, drumlins and moraines. The lakes that are such a distinctive part of Madison's geography are in fact glacial artifacts, and the city lies just a few miles east of the terminal moraine where the glacier finally reversed course and retreated north-

ward. Once one has learned to think like a glacier, one can never gaze upon the modern Wisconsin landscape without also seeing the ghostly blue ice that transformed it so long ago.

The same can be said of past and present vegetation. At the time Euro-American settlers arrived here in the early nineteenth century, they encountered ecosystems dominated by prairies and oak savannahs, with widely spaced trees scattered amid fields of grass tall enough to brush the shoulders of a man on horseback. These grasslands and savannahs had been created on rich post-glacial soils through the combined contributions of irregular rainfall, lightning-caused fire, and Indian burning. Although the first white settlers described the prairies as a natural wonder, they also understood the role of Indians in keeping down the woody vegetation that would otherwise have dominated the terrain. Once Indians had diminished in numbers and been removed to reservations, and once pioneer farmers had begun the hard work of erecting fences and other fire-susceptible structures on the land, the trees and shrubs no longer burned and the prairies were doomed. Southern Wisconsin today is a mingling of towns and farms and forests on lands that were once covered with grass. The forests that seem so natural today are products of human and natural history—much like the prairies that seemed so natural in 1836.

Peculiar as it might seem to some people, my dawning fascination for the deep history behind the landscapes of my childhood home was not at all unusual. As I've already suggested, scholars at the University of Wisconsin have been writing about and teaching this subject literally for generations, ever since the days when Frederick Jackson Turner first offered a land-centered interpretation of the American frontier as a source for much of what is distinctive about the United States. The workshops on "reading the landscape" I attended as a high school student at the university's arboretum were in fact modeled on a famous course taught by Aldo Leopold as early as the 1930s. Although Leopold's classic *A Sand County Almanac* is usually read today as one of the greatest twentieth-century contributions to American nature writing, it is no less a meditation on the history of human interactions with the American land. I learned how to "read the landscape" from the work of scholars and teachers whose names I didn't all know as a boy, but whose passion for understanding

past environmental change was just as profound as Turner's or Leopold's: Charles Van Hise, Lawrence Martin, Benjamin Hibbard, John Curtis, Norman Fassett, Grant Cottam, James Willard Hurst, Andrew Hill Clark, Glenn Trewartha, Jim Zimmerman, Virginia Kline, Allan and Margaret Bogue, Vernon Carstensen, Morton Rothstein, and many, many others. These individuals may not have called themselves environmental historians, and their scholarship may have differed from modern environmental history in important respects, but there can be no question that they and others like them at many different institutions helped lay the foundations that made environmental history possible, especially for the young man who wrote this book.

When I arrived at Yale in 1978 to receive my formal training as a historian, I thus carried an awful lot of Wisconsin baggage with me. During my junior year of high school, I had conducted an elaborate research project in which I reconstructed the "presettlement vegetation" of a nearby county—the county where Aldo Leopold's famous "Shack" is located—by laboriously mapping all the different tree species recorded by the original public land surveyors in the 1830s and comparing these with subsequent vegetation records to assess the dynamics of past ecological change. During my final year as a UW–Madison undergraduate, I had done a senior honors thesis on the life of the California poet Robinson Jeffers, whose descriptions of the Big Sur coast remain some of the most powerful environmental writing in all of American literature. And after two years of study at Oxford University in England, I had completed a doctoral dissertation on energy consumption in the city of Coventry, inspired by a commencement address I had delivered at the University of Wisconsin on the energy crisis of the 1970s. In the essay for my application to graduate school, I told the Yale History Department that I wanted to follow up my research on Coventry with a larger and more ambitious study of interactions between the city of Chicago and its frontier hinterland during the nineteenth century, with an eye to understanding the environmental transformation of a region that—not by accident—included my home state of Wisconsin.

I share this catalog of scholarly juvenilia not because these projects (all but the last of which remain unpublished) had any special merit in their own right, but to demonstrate that I came

to Yale fully intending to work on American frontier history, especially in the Middle West. If I was interested in a particular region, it surely lay on the sunset side of the Appalachian Mountains. If I was committed to a particular period, it was the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Ecological change in colonial New England, in other words, was the furthest thing from my mind. Yale has long had one of the nation's leading doctoral programs in the history of the trans-Mississippi West. The western historian there, Howard Lamar, was famous for the intellectual generosity and flexibility with which he nurtured young scholars pursuing unusual approaches to the western past. Even though my midwestern interests were already a bit unusual as the field of American western history continued its long-standing migration across the Mississippi and beyond, Howard was willing to encourage the study of city-hinterland relations I proposed to do on Chicago and its region. I got started with the research shortly after my arrival in New Haven, and it eventually became the book *Nature's Metropolis*, published in 1991.

Before I could get down to serious work on Chicago and the nineteenth-century Midwest, however, Yale quite reasonably obliged me to do a year of coursework even though I already had a graduate degree from Oxford. Among the requirements was a class culminating in a major research project. As luck would have it, the best available option the year I arrived was a two-semester reading-and-research seminar in American colonial history taught by Edmund S. Morgan, whose teaching was as legendary and brilliant as his scholarship. His course was unquestionably a chronological and geographical detour from what I had come to Yale to learn—but it was also one of the happiest detours of my life. This book would never have come into being without it.

Here I will offer what is probably the most important lesson of this entire narrative: scholars and writers come to many of their most important projects quite by accident. Or rather: the work we do is the predictable result of our own experiences and passions, but it is no less surely the *un*predictable result of being at the right place at the right time. My years growing up in Wisconsin had certainly prepared me to think and care about the role of human beings in changing the land around them. But I never would have brought that interest to colonial New England had I not stumbled onto Ed Morgan's seminar during the fall of

1978. I sometimes think that the most important skill of good historians is not so much to come up with brilliant new ideas—new ideas are easy to overrate in a discipline whose practitioners spend all their time studying the very old news of events that happened long ago—but to notice what has been under our noses all along. Our eccentric interests send us searching, and our training helps our eyes to see, but it is finally serendipity that leads us to our best work. Follow your passions and use your training, but be on the lookout for happy accident.

Ed Morgan's approach to his seminar was to encourage each student to read generally on the history of colonial America while seeking out a possible research topic for the major paper that would be due at the end of the second semester. During the first semester, he posed a series of minor historical riddles that could only be answered by spending many hours rummaging through the stacks of Yale's Sterling Library in search of some obscure scrap of information buried we knew not where. I still vividly remember the two tasks he assigned me. The first was to identify what kinds of commodities the original colonists were hoping to find when they set sail toward the far side of the Atlantic. This question led me to the extraordinary brief document by Richard Hakluyt titled "Discourse of Western Planting," written in preparation for Sir Walter Raleigh's expeditions to Roanoke. In it, Hakluyt described in just a few paragraphs the commodities that might render the colonial enterprise profitable . . . and thereby set me to thinking about how the desire for such commodities might serve as an engine of economic and ecological change. *Changes in the Land* thus had one of its origins in an obscure handwritten document from the 1580s, long before New England even existed.

The second riddle Morgan posed for me was how citizens of the American colonies responded to the Proclamation of 1763, which forbade settlement west of the Appalachian Mountains. The Proclamation is often cited in history textbooks as one of the colonists' major grievances during the years leading up to the American Revolution, so I blithely went off to find evidence of their outrage. After weeks of rummaging, I had found almost nothing at all. Morgan had laid a trap for me, and I won't ever forget its intended lesson: never assume that the way we understand the past today is the way people in the past understood

their own present. We may have learned in school that colonial unhappiness at British restrictions on westward expansion was an important cause of the American Revolution, but people in 1763 barely even noticed that the Proclamation had been issued. The implication for this book is clear: although we may lament the ecological changes we now recognize in the colonial landscape, few people at the time would have seen them as we do. Our concerns in the present will inevitably shape our understanding of the past, which is as it should be—but they also tempt us to *mis*understand the past by imposing our own assumptions on people quite different from ourselves. One of history's greatest challenges is to balance these competing imperatives.

While climbing up and down the library stacks searching for prerevolutionary grievances I never found, I was of course also looking for something about which I could write a research paper. To prime our intellectual pumps, Ed Morgan met with each student in the seminar at the start of the year, asking us about our special interests and brainstorming with us about topics that might intrigue us. He already knew of my environmental concerns, so he suggested that I seek out documents that would permit me to write about some aspect of colonial ecological change. I'm sure he had in mind a well-bounded project devoted to a single kind of environmental transformation and its causes, since that was the only kind of topic one could reasonably hope to address in the half year we had available. I vaguely recall that he suggested I might look at the role of the pig in colonial Virginia—a topic that, despite my own failure to pursue it, still seems to me well worth investigating. Indeed, we could use a worldwide history of the pig as one of history's great imperial animals.

So I headed off to the library in search of pigs and other plants and animals in the colonial records. I quickly discovered that early travelers' accounts were filled with vivid descriptions of the colonial landscape. These were invaluable in providing a snapshot of New World ecosystems during the early years of colonization, and equally useful in helping me understand how European visitors *thought about* those ecosystems. I soon identified another cluster of documents, mostly written during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, whose authors devoted considerable space to describing the environmental

changes they saw going on around them in the early United States. I was of course delighted to have found these accounts, since they made my project seem increasingly feasible. Without sources, historians cannot do their work. No matter how compelling the question we ask, nothing can happen until we have answered a second question, so central to historical scholarship that it almost defines the discipline: *What are the documents?* I was beginning to glimpse an answer to this question, and few things are more satisfying (or reassuring) to a historian.

However pleased I might be with my newfound sources, though, they posed a serious problem for me. A frustrating feature of both sets of documents was that none of them contained very much information about any particular aspect of the colonial environment: a few sentences here on pigs, a few sentences there on passenger pigeons, a few more over here on white pines, and so on and on. I began to worry that I would not be able to find enough material about any one topic to write the kind of narrowly focused seminar paper that my teacher seemed to have in mind. What I possessed instead was a little bit of information about a whole lot of environmental changes. So I began to wonder if I should write a much broader and more impressionistic essay surveying the many different transformations that seemed to be going on in the colonial landscape. My best descriptions seemed to be from New England, so I decided to focus mainly on that region. By juxtaposing my two most important sets of documents—one clustered in the first half of the seventeenth century at the dawn of the colonial period, the other clustered in the late eighteenth century as the colonies became a new nation—I might offer a kind of before-and-after snapshot of ecological change.

I checked with Morgan to see if he would tolerate such an ambitious but potentially superficial seminar paper. Although he expressed some doubt about the vast scale of my proposed topic, he was willing to let me go ahead. (It was, after all, only a seminar paper, so if it proved a total disaster, no irretrievable harm would be done to my nascent career, especially since I wasn't planning to be a colonial historian anyway.) I spent several months gathering every scrap of information I could find about New England ecosystems and the many ways Euro-American colonists transformed them. Probably because of my Wisconsin background,

and because I was much more a historian of the American West than a colonialist, I half consciously imposed a kind of neo-Turnerian frontier structure on the various changes I was cataloging for my story. Beginning with a description of Indian New England as it appeared at the time of English settlement, I then offered a brief account of the epidemic diseases that had proved to be so devastating for native populations at the time of first contact. Next came changes in the forest as colonists cut trees for lumber and cleared land for agriculture. After that came the various species of plants and animals that colonists introduced to New England ecosystems either by accident or by intention. And then, at the very end, I tried to describe how all these elements came together in an integrated system of colonial agriculture. It's worth noting that the sequence I've just sketched represents a narrative analytical structure much more than a chronological one, since most of these processes were in fact stimultaneous. This narrative sequence is among the chief debts that the book owes to Frederick Jackson Turner.

Like many students who wait too long as deadlines approach, I wrote my first draft over a feverish three-day period with no more than four hours of sleep per night. I finally finished it at 4 a.m. on the day I was scheduled to deliver it to the class—not quite an all-nighter, but pretty close. The result was a very long seminar paper which—if I had double-spaced my typing and used normal margins instead of trying to hide the paper's true length in order to keep within the required limits for the assignment—would have been about sixty or seventy pages long. When I gave my formal presentation, Morgan was generous in his praise, and other students seemed to find the paper interesting even though a number of them clearly didn't know quite what to make of its peculiar environmental approach.

Afterward, Morgan told me he hoped I would try to get it published, but he said I faced a serious difficulty before I could do so. On the one hand, the essay was really too long to be a standard article in an academic journal, though its arguments were dense enough that to make it any shorter might undermine what it was trying to say. On the other hand, it was clearly too short to be a book, and would have to be doubled or tripled in length before any publisher would consider it. Morgan clearly thought that the essay was good enough to deserve publication, but he didn't have

any simple solution to the problem of its awkward length. Since I had come to Yale not to write about colonial New England but to study Chicago and its hinterland in the nineteenth-century Middle West, the work of revising this oversized seminar paper did not seem an especially wise use of my time. So I put the essay and all of my notes for it into a filing cabinet in a corner of my office, not at all sure that I would ever find time to look at it again.

It sat in that filing cabinet for nearly two years, and there is every reason to believe that it might be there still if not for the next piece of unexpected serendipity that came my way. The dean of Yale College retired, and in due course the university announced that his successor would be none other than my dissertation director, Howard Lamar. This wouldn't have mattered much to me personally, except that Howard's undergraduate courses would need someone else to teach them for at least the next five years while he attended to his new administrative duties. So Yale advertised for an assistant professor to teach the history of the American West, and because I already had a doctorate from Oxford, I could apply for that job even though my Yale Ph.D. was only in its early stages. I turned in my application, and was delighted when I learned that the search committee was interested enough in my candidacy that I would be one of two applicants invited to deliver an on-campus lecture in order to demonstrate my qualifications for the job.

This was great news, save for one worrisome detail. Yale wanted to hire a scholar working in western American history. My Oxford dissertation was on energy consumption in a nineteenth-century British city—not exactly the best topic for a persuasive job talk. My Yale dissertation on Chicago was as yet completely unwritten, so it was pretty worthless too. My only reasonably complete work of American history was the paper from Ed Morgan's seminar on ecological change in colonial New England. So I took a deep breath and told the Yale History Department that this would be the topic of my job talk, hoping they would buy my argument that it was a legitimate work of frontier history even though it was arguably in the wrong region and the wrong period for what they thought they were hoping to hire.

I gave the talk, and it helped get me the job. More importantly for this narrative, though, when the New York publisher Arthur

Wang visited Yale a week later in search of possible book projects for his firm of Hill and Wang, Yale's diplomatic historian, Gaddis Smith, happened to mention the talk on ecological change in colonial New England that he had just heard me deliver. Had that conversation not taken place—if Gaddis had been out of town that day, or if Arthur hadn't bothered to stop by his office—I'm pretty sure there would never have been a book called *Changes in the Land*. It's the strangest piece of good fortune in a story already pretty full of such accidents. I got a phone call from Arthur shortly thereafter asking if he might read the essay. I sent it off, and a few days later he called back to say he thought there might be a book in it. He wasn't sure what the market would be, didn't know whether any bookstores would ever carry or any teachers would ever assign a book on such an unusual topic, but he said he was willing to publish it if I could suggest how it might be expanded to book length. It was quite a gamble to take on a twenty-eight-year-old unknown author who had never published a book before. Among the many people responsible for bringing this volume into being, Arthur Wang stands near the front of the line, and I will be forever in his debt.

Within just a couple of weeks, I had a book contract. A few months later, after one of the most intense periods of research and writing of my entire life, I submitted the completed manuscript for *Changes in the Land*—the title was Arthur's suggestion—to Hill and Wang. It still astonishes me that the book emerged so quickly and easily, since no other writing project I've ever done has been so painless, or indeed so exhilarating. It almost seemed to write itself. One reason for this, I think, is that I already knew pretty clearly the weaknesses of the original essay that needed to be addressed if the book was to make a persuasive case. For one thing, the essay had almost nothing about Indians in it, so one of my tasks was to survey everything I could find about the native peoples of New England and incorporate their relationships with regional environments into my argument. For another, the Morgan seminar paper said nothing at all about property, which seemed to me to be so central to the causes of ecological change that to ignore it was very nearly to omit the whole point of my argument. So I rummaged through economics and anthropology and legal theory and colonial history to give myself a crash course in property rights, out of which emerged

the pivotal chapter titled "Bounding the Land." Anyone who has read *Changes in the Land* will no doubt be surprised that its predecessor said almost nothing about differences between Indians and colonists or about property, since these are at the very heart of the book's arguments. But such was the case. It is a reminder that every history can be told in many different ways, and often our tales of the past get better and more nuanced the more we tell them, especially in response to constructive criticism.

Changes in the Land was published in the fall of 1983, and initially seemed to attract little attention. *The New York Times Book Review* paid no attention to it, and after half a year it looked as if it might drop from sight as such an oddity that no one knew what to do with it. Then, in the spring, I received the wonderful news that it had been awarded the Francis Parkman Prize for the best work of American history published in 1983. Suddenly the *Times Book Review* decided it needed a review after all, and John Demos was commissioned to write a glowing evaluation that led to a much-cherished friendship with a scholar I had always admired but never met. The review and the prize made a big difference. Suddenly I was known to my colleagues as an "environmental historian," a label none of us would have recognized just a decade before. *Changes in the Land* was thus among several early works that helped legitimize environmental history as a new field of inquiry, making it possible not just for me personally but for many other scholars to pursue questions about changing human relationships with the natural world in the past. Quite simply, the book changed my life, and I will be forever grateful for that fact.

If I could rewrite the book today, would I write it differently? Of course—but I'm certain it wouldn't be the same book, and might lose some of its chief virtues in the process. A few of the alterations would be of a fairly technical sort. The original text overestimates the fecundity of colonial pigs, for instance, and probably encourages at least some readers to imagine that Indians burned the entire New England forest, when in fact their impacts were surely concentrated in coastal areas and near permanent settlements. The book's arguments about burning remain accurate, I think, but I would work harder today to make sure readers understand the patchy and contrasting ways that different landscapes were affected by native burning.

Other changes I might make in the book are more conceptual, and would require much more extensive revisions to be adequately addressed. Among the book's odder features is its virtual silence on matters pertaining to religion—a pretty peculiar omission for a study of seventeenth-century New England. In writing *Changes in the Land*, my decision to say nothing about Puritanism was quite conscious. On the one hand, I feared I would sink into a morass from which I might never extricate myself if I tried to encompass the vast historiography, from Perry Miller forward, on Puritan theology and beliefs. But I was also concerned that the extreme scarcity of documents about seventeenth-century *Indian* religiosity would inevitably skew my account toward the spiritual views of the colonists. So I vowed that if my sources required me to be unfair to Indian worldviews, I was going to be equally unfair to those of the colonists.

It is not a decision I would defend at any length today, though I still don't know how I would solve the enormous asymmetry of colonial vs. Indian sources. One result is the relentlessly materialist analytical approach that characterizes this book, which is both its greatest weakness and its greatest strength. My subsequent work—first in the anthology *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, and then in the history I am now writing about human storytelling in the small Wisconsin town of Portage—has sought to strike a better balance between materialist and idealist approaches to the past. But I doubt I could do the same thing to *Changes* without seriously muddying its arguments. At a minimum, it would have to become a much longer book, and its core narrative would almost surely become more convoluted and difficult to follow.

The other chief problem with the original book is its use of the word "capitalism" to make admittedly provocative assertions about the chief engine of ecological change in the colonial period. An entire generation of historians has argued quite vehemently about the extent to which colonists did or did not practice subsistence agriculture, were or were not oriented toward market production, and were or were not laying the foundations for the full-blown capitalism that would later emerge as the dominant feature of the U.S. economy. I still believe that in comparing Indians and colonists it's impossible to ignore the latter's greater degree of attachment to transatlantic markets. I also

believe that scholars who stress the subsistence nature of early New England settlement pay too little attention to the ecological changes described in this book as crucial evidence of the market dynamics that were at work right from the beginning of colonial settlement. But it's also true that the picture of "capitalism" offered in this book remains too schematic. It doesn't do justice to the complex evolution of market institutions from the 1600s through the 1800s, and it doesn't adequately explore regional variations in market impacts. The book's attention to the social contexts within which market relationships developed is equally limited. Much of the most important work in colonial history over the past twenty years has addressed such questions. For that matter, *Nature's Metropolis* represents an effort on my part to explore the complexities of capitalism much more fully than was possible in *Changes in the Land*. I don't think the arguments of this book are fundamentally wrong, and I'm perfectly willing to stand by them. But I would undoubtedly handle them differently were I to write the book today.

Whether the result would be a better book, I very much doubt. Among the chief virtues of *Changes in the Land* are the brevity and directness with which it makes its case. It tells a good story, and an important one. It simplifies, yes, but all histories simplify as they seek to clarify a past so complicated that it would otherwise overwhelm our ability to understand it. Readers seeking more detailed knowledge of colonial economies or social relations or religiosity or politics can turn to innumerable different studies to aid their quest. But if they wish to understand the environmental changes that accompanied colonization, this book still offers what I hope is a brief and compellingly readable overview that is right in most of its details. I'm proud I can still say that after twenty years, and I'm profoundly grateful for the lucky series of accidents that brought it into being.

William Cronon
Madison, Wisconsin
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